

Traditionally in health care, knowledge and authority have rested with medical professionals, and care is delivered in professional settings. Individuals have been considered solely as "patients," i.e. defined by their relationship to doctors. Health information technology (HIT) is enabling consumers (i.e. an individual outside of a patient context), patients, and family caregivers to more fully understand health and illness, self-manage health and illness at home and in the community where feasible, and partner with their medical providers as needed. As a result there is the potential for a rebalancing of the power relationship between doctors and patients toward greater collaboration and increased attention to contexts of daily life in which "health happens." However, the available technologies and their actual implementation are currently insufficient to empower consumers, patients and caregivers to fulfill their new responsibilities; and many medical professionals do not appreciate the benefits of a partnership approach. This paper will present the HIT tools that are available and emerging; evidence of their benefits; limitations due to technology, policy and culture; and recommendations for optimizing their use. Momentum is building in many countries toward holding consumers and patients accountable financially and morally for their health. Before going further in that direction, it is vital that those who influence technology, policy and practice understand the tools and approaches that can best exploit the potential of these technologies to build partnerships that can improve health and care.